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April 18, 2012

TO: Each Supervisor

FROM: Jonathan E. Fielding, M.D., M.P.H. *JEF*  
Director and Health Officer

SUBJECT: **SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PHYSICIAN MAGAZINE ARTICLE**

Enclosed is a copy of the feature article in the April 2012 issue of the Southern California Physician, the official magazine of the Los Angeles County Medical Association. This article highlights some of the work the Department of Public Health does in order to address a number of critical public health needs throughout the county. Specifically, the article includes the work of Project TRUST, RENEW LA, Choose Health LA, and the PLACE program. Some of the accomplishments include:

- More than 1,140,00 residents will be able to walk or bike in a safe and welcoming environment with the adoption of land use and transportation policies that were designed for health.
- More than 2,600 preschoolers in 87 Los Angeles Unified preschools now have access to improved nutrition and increased physical activity.
- More than 18,500 employees in all County departments and the City of Los Angeles now have worksite lactation accommodations that support breastfeeding mothers.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me.

JEF:mh

Enclosure

c: Chief Executive Officer  
Acting County Counsel  
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors

# Problems

# Programs

A county's public health problems are not easy ones to solve, but Los Angeles is implementing some effective—and some experimental—programs.

BY CHERYL ENGLAND

**EVERY COUNTY EXPERIENCES** its share of public health issues and Los Angeles is no exception. However, in a large metropolitan area such as L.A., the problems are often exacerbated by a variety of cultures, numerous different and often far-flung communities and problems attributed to population growth such as air pollution and a lack of open space. Yet, even as the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health acknowledges the challenges, it continues to implement experimental programs such as its Streets for People pilot project, which is part of a larger movement to rethink L.A.'s streets as a resource for all users, not just cars.

None of the big issues facing the county should come as a surprise to a physician. Obesity, substance abuse, smoking, depression, sexually transmitted diseases and dental disease are all major factors in the county's rates of morbidity, disability and mortality. "The real creeping giant among epidemics is Alzheimer's," says Jonathan E. Fielding, MD, Director of the L.A. County DPH. "We have an aging population and there is no effective treatment for the disease. The impact on families and caregivers widens its affect beyond many other diseases."

So what is the status of community health in Los Angeles? What areas are we showing improvement? And where are we struggling? Even more to the point, what are we doing about it?



## Imagine a Smoke-Free L.A.

One place that the DPH has made great strides is in curbing tobacco use. Tobacco remains the single most preventable cause of disease, disability, and death in the United States. In Los Angeles County, an estimated 9,000 people die from smoking and smoking-related diseases, and another 180,000 live with at least one serious illness caused by smoking. Despite these risks, approximately one million Los Angeles County adults smoke cigarettes. In addition to the enormous health toll is the significant economic burden of tobacco use—more than \$2.3 billion a year in medical costs and another \$2.0 billion a year from lost productivity.

The harmful effects of smoking extend beyond the smoker. In L.A. County, an estimated 585,000 nonsmoking adults and 336,000 children are exposed to secondhand smoke in their homes. Secondhand smoke exposure causes serious disease and death, including heart disease and lung cancer in nonsmoking adults and sudden infant death syndrome, acute respiratory infections, ear problems, and more frequent and severe asthma attacks in children.

Project TRUST—Tobacco Reduction Using Effective Strategies and Teamwork—is a new program sponsored by the DPH. The campaign includes its own website at [www.laquits.com](http://www.laquits.com), which includes educational information on the dangers of smoking and second hand smoke, resources and information on the incidence of smoking among teenagers. The site even includes a form that residents can fill out and receive free telephone counseling on quitting smoking—a joint venture with the University of California, San Diego.

In addition, the DPH has been instrumental in ensuring that smoking is no longer allowed in outdoor dining areas in the City of Los Angeles. The policy went into effect on March 8, 2011. And, notably, several cities—Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Calabasas, Glendale, Pasadena, and Santa Monica—have adopted policies that create smoke-free public places, including parks, plazas, worksites, farmer's markets, and other outdoor areas. Several cities—Burbank, Glendale, South Pasadena, Santa Monica and Calabasas—have passed policies to protect nonsmokers from secondhand smoke exposure in their apartments.

The DPH says that with the addition of these policies, more than 75 percent

of the county's 10.4 million residents are covered by tobacco control and prevention policies. "Lung cancer rates are going down," says Dr. Fielding. "We've seen a definite reduction in smoking in L.A. County—less than 14 percent of adults in the county are now smokers."

## Healthy Living

On the Choose Health L.A. website ([www.choosehealthla.com](http://www.choosehealthla.com)) that the DPH created, residents can learn about healthy eating, exercise and overall healthy living. An interactive sugar calculator on the site lets you put in the number of sugared drinks (sodas, sports drinks, coffee drinks, sweet tea and more) you consume per week and then calculates both the packs and pounds of sugar you drink each week, month, year and five years. If you use the calculator, you'll find that drinking just one soda per week adds up to 36.85 pounds of sugar over five years!

In 2010, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Communities Putting Prevention to Work* initiative, the DPH launched RENEW LA County—Renew Environments for Nutrition, Exercise and Wellness in Los Angeles County—a two year project focused on environmental changes to prevent chronic disease, improve nutrition and increase physical activity among all children and adults in the county. As part of this effort, RENEW established a joint use task force, Joint Use Moving People to Play, comprised of community-based organizations, government institutions, numerous school district representatives and public health agencies, to increase physical activity opportunities by providing LA County youth and families with safe places to play and be active. Since RENEW's formation, seven school districts in L.A. County have drafted 16 joint use agreements aimed at increasing physical activity for students and families in their districts. In addition, 72 schools in the county have undergone extensive physical education staff development training for more than 100 teachers, primarily in elementary schools where the need is greatest.

The DPH has also launched its pilot Streets for People project, which has a stated goal to inexpensively repurpose underused portions of streets, changing them into vibrant public spaces, and turning streets for cars into streets for people. The idea took hold because City agencies, including the DPH, are try-

ing to decrease rates of obesity, improve air quality, create alternative transportation choices, and address the lack of park space. The first pilot pedestrian plaza recently opened in the Silver Lake neighborhood. One block in the area has been converted into a pedestrian plaza named Sunset Triangle Plaza. The periphery of the cheerful plaza is lined with potted plants and the space contains tables and chairs and a playfully decorated street surface. The street is closed to traffic for the one-year duration of the pilot project.

## No One Walks in L.A.

The department's PLACE Program (Policies for livable, Active Communities and Environments) is dedicated to developing healthy, safe and active environments that include, for example, pedestrian walkways and bicycle paths. The DPH is awarding grants to organizations that submit proposals to further the goal. The grants are made possible by an award received by the Department of Public Health from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "In most communities, people don't walk," says Dr. Fielding. "People in suburbs are generally seven to eight pounds heavier than those in urban areas."

Glendale, for example, has adopted a Safe and Healthy Streets Plan using PLACE grant funding. The Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition worked with the City of Glendale to develop the plan over the past three years. The goal is to help make Glendale streets a safer place for pedestrians and cyclists and get people out of their cars and onto bikes and sidewalks.

Culver City, too, recently adopted its first-ever Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan using PLACE funding. The plan will serve as an official guideline for developing policies, programs and facilities needed to support walking and biking in the city. The plan proposes a bicycle network of about 37 miles of bikeways as well as pedestrian zones and corridors that include extensive streetscape and landscape improvements.

Individual cities are also jumping on the bandwagon. El Monte—whose residents are generally more obese and less healthy than many other cities in the county—has recently added a Health and Wellness element its general plan. The addition is meant to align transportation and land use planning with health-related goals. Long Beach recently opened a separated bikeway along 3rd



Street and Broadway in downtown to protect bicyclists from cars. The City of Los Angeles adopted a bicycle master plan in 2011 to create 1700 miles of bike lanes. To achieve this goal, 40 miles of bikeways are to be built every year and existing gaps will be closed to create connectivity within the city.

#### More to Overcome: The Environment

Despite the programs (about 40 in all) and the decrease in lung cancer and smoking, there is—as any physician knows—a long way to go in improving public health. Numerous problems still exist due to a variety of factors. Dr. Fielding sorts the issues into three categories—social environment, physical environment and natural environment.

In the social environment, a person's years of formal education correlate to their life span. Generally, a person who is not a high school graduate lives seven to eight years less than one who is. In L.A. County 22.1 percent of adults do not have a high school degree compared to the national average of 15.7 percent.

In addition, poverty plays a huge role in a person's health. It's no secret that people below the poverty line, for example, eat more junk food because it is cheaper per calorie. In this area, L.A. County once again fares worse than the national average—16 percent of L.A. County households live below the Federal poverty line while the national average is 12.5 percent. In addition, 5.6 percent of adults in L.A. County are unemployed but looking for work compared to the

national average of 4.5 percent.

In the physical environment, most suburban communities in the county do not have mass transit or shopping areas within walking distance, so people drive more and, thus, get less exercise. And, despite the decrease in smoking in L.A. County, 13.2 percent of children are exposed to second hand smoke one or more days per week.

In the natural environment, air pollution—especially in L.A. is a huge factor in health issues. "In California, 5,000 to 6,000 deaths each year are attributed to air pollution," says Dr. Fielding. "That cause doesn't show up on a death certificate."

#### More to Overcome: The Statistics

Obesity is a major source of health care costs and L.A. is no exception—in 2006 the economic burden of overweight and obesity in the County was estimated at \$6 billion, which included \$3.6 billion in health care costs and \$2.4 billion in lost productivity costs. "Obesity is a terrible epidemic," says Dr. Fielding. "There are a lot of ramifications—kidney failure, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. It's really disturbing to see Type 2 diabetes in children now. When I was in training, we never saw Type 2 in children."

Sexually transmitted diseases are another area of huge concern. HIV mortality rates remain high and syphilis and Chlamydia rates remain higher in L.A. than in the rest of the nation. "We still see large attacks of sexually transmitted diseases," says Dr. Fielding. "There is still no substantial reduction of HIV. Plus

there is Chlamydia and even outbreaks of syphilis. If you add in herpes, then sexually transmitted diseases are an epidemic."

Still, cardiovascular disease remains the largest contributor to mortality so it cannot be underestimated. In 2005, the leading cause of death in L.A. County was coronary heart disease. The incidence of adults diagnosed with hypertension has grown from 15.8 percent in 1997 to 24.7 percent in 2007. Cholesterol and diabetes rates have grown accordingly, as well. "Heart disease is the number one cause of death," says Dr. Fielding. "So it is not something we can underestimate."

Other issues plague L.A. County, as they do other major metropolitan areas. While L.A. has made progress in curbing homicide, it still remains a factor. "Statistically, a black male 18 years of age or younger will live fewer years than an Asian female due to particularly high homicide attacks," says Dr. Fielding.

#### Avoiding the Issues

Of course, avoiding the health problems in the first place is the key goal. The DPH pays particular attention to screening and educating residents on lifestyle changes. And the department continues to do a lot of work on substance abuse within communities, thanks to Federal grants.

The health of any community will probably never be perfect, but at least best efforts are being made. The DPH efforts as well as contributions from community clinics and physicians who volunteer their time is making a dent in the ongoing health of residents in L.A. ■

## Focus on Accomplishments

The L.A. County Department of Public Health has a long list of successes under its belt. Here is just a sampling of the more recent ones:

- More than 162,000 residents in ten cities—Baldwin Park, Bell Gardens, El Monte, Huntington Park, La Puente, Long Beach, Pasadena, Pico Rivera, San Fernando and South El Monte—now have access to healthier foods and beverages.
- More than 350,000 students in Los Angeles County now have access to more whole grains, more fresh fruits and vegetables and less sodium in dishes including chicken pozole, quinoa and Caribbean meatballs.
- More than 2,600 preschoolers in 87 Los Angeles Universal Preschools now have access to improved nutrition and increased physical activity.
- More than 18,500 employees in all county departments and the City of Los Angeles now have worksite lactation accommodations that support breastfeeding mothers.
- More than 28,000 residents in communities with few recreational venues can now exercise at local schools, as a result of joint use agreements.
- More than 30,000 students at more than 70 schools have increased opportunities for physical education.
- More than 1,140,000 residents will be able to walk or bike in a safe and welcoming environment with the adoption of land use and transportation policies that were designed for health.